

Compassion *in* Colombia

*Airmen provide medical assistance
to people of Popayan*

story and photos by Staff Sgt. Matthew Bates

Mariju Full Sanchez is the director of the Hospital Toribio Maya, a small clinic located in the remote town of Popayan, Colombia. Most days she has to turn away dozens of people because they don't have any medical coverage.

"They are poor and can't afford it," she said.

For two weeks, however, she didn't have to turn anyone away because he or she was too poor, too old or too sick. A team of U.S. medical personnel would be on hand to administer free medical care as part of a Medical Readiness Training Exercise, or MEDRETE. For those days, the clinic's doors were open to everyone, and just about everyone showed up.

More than 3,000 people had gathered outside the clinic, waiting in long lines that stretched around the building since the previous evening. The free care provided by the team of U.S. doctors was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the people of Popayan. For them, this was nothing short of a miracle.



People gather outside the Hospital Toribio Maya in Popayan, Colombia, to receive treatment from a U.S. medical team performing a medical readiness training exercise.





Building relations

This MEDRETE was the first such exercise to take place in Colombia in the past nine years. In total, the team treated 4,063 patients in three separate clinics over eight treatment days.

While staggering, these numbers show the tremendous need for medical care that currently exists in Colombia and the importance of continuing similar medical exercises in the country.

“These types of exercises go a long way toward promoting human rights and international relations between the United States and Colombian forces,” said Master Sgt. Vernon Sandt, superintendent of medical plans and operations with Headquarters Air Forces Southern at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz. “The combined training gives both countries outstanding skills-building experience for their healthcare personnel, while bringing much-needed aid to the Colombian people.”

U.S. Southern Command sponsors approximately 70 MEDRETEs per year, and 12th Air Force and Air Forces Southern, the air and space component to USSOUTHCOM, plan and execute about 30 of these in locations throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Overall, the MEDRETEs provide care to more than 200,000 individuals. In many cases, this is the only professional medical care they will ever receive.

Impressive as they are, these numbers don’t matter much to the team that spent a little more than a week in Popayan. Its members look instead to the intangibles — the gratitude they saw in each patient’s eyes, the thousands of people who gathered outside the clinic each morning, and the help they provided to a group of people who were in desperate need of it.

Maternal comfort

For Yovany Maca, the doctors brought relief — relief that her unborn child was healthy and doing fine. She is pregnant with her second child and experienced complications during her previous pregnancy. When she heard the U.S. doctors were visiting her city and bringing an ultrasound machine with them, she knew she had to get an appointment.

Waiting outside for six hours, Mrs. Maca made her way into the clinic in the early afternoon and was able to see the gynecologist, Maj. (Dr.) Andrea Shields.

“We ran an ultrasound, and everything looked great,” said Major Shields, who is with the 59th Medical Wing at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. “As far as we could tell, there were no problems at all.”

There were a couple of surprises, though. Mrs. Maca learned she was having a girl and was a month further along than she thought.

“Now I am calm,” Mrs. Maca said. “They [the U.S. doctors] told me the baby is OK, and I feel much better ... much calmer.”

This day, something as commonplace as an ultrasound brought one Colombian woman the comfort she needed to feel her baby was safe.

A sense of duty

In the business of saving lives, sometimes the number of lives that need care can be overwhelming. This was the situation the medical team found themselves in while working in the Hospital Toribio Maya.

From the moment the team arrived, it knew it had its work cut out. The large crowd waiting outside was an intimidating sight.

“I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s almost overwhelming,” said



Maj. (Dr.) Andrea Shields (left), a gynecologist with the 59th Medical Wing at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, performs an ultrasound on Yovany Maca at the Hospital Toribio Maya in Popayan, Colombia. For Ms. Maca, and many other local women, this was the first time they had ever undergone an ultrasound procedure. Maj. (Dr.) Chris Putnam (above), an ophthalmologist from Lackland, tests the vision of a Colombian woman.

Staff Sgt. Joan Jackson, the team’s pharmacy technician from Lackland.

Still, this is exactly what the team members wanted — the ability to provide free medical care to as many people as possible. Theirs was a mission of mercy, and it was evident the village of Popayan was in need.

“We’re only limited by the amount of supplies we have and the number of hours there are in a day,” said Lt. Col. Erika Struble, a staff intern on the team.

The 14-person team, which consisted of oral surgery, pediatric, internal medicine, dermatology, ophthalmology, gynecology and pharmaceutical personnel, brought more than \$40,000 worth of medical supplies and medications to use throughout the course of the MEDRETE. Judging by the size of the waiting crowd, the team would need every bit of these supplies and every minute of the hours they had.

The gift of sight

For the first time in 10 years, Jesus Vieira can see. While he may find this a miracle and the “work of angels,” the true reason for his new sight is more down to earth. The team’s ophthalmologist Maj. (Dr.) Chris Putnam simply examined Mr. Vieira’s eyes and prescribed him a brand-new pair of glasses.

Mr. Vieira is only one of hundreds of similar patients Major Putnam saw throughout the course of the MEDRETE, but as long as he had glasses to hand out, he was happy to do so.

“I just wish I could do more,” he said. “Some of these people have problems with their eyes that I can do nothing for and that’s hard. But we will help a lot of people just because the care is free, and they normally wouldn’t be able to afford glasses on their own.”

The patients were excited to accept their new glasses, even those considered less stylish by Western standards. The glasses Mr. Vieira proudly wore were actually women’s glasses. but they offered him the functionality he needed

“We have a limited supply of each prescription, so if a man needs a certain prescription and all we have is women’s glasses, that’s what he



gets,” Major Putnam said. “But, they can see and that makes all the difference in the world.”

And, more importantly, so does the fact that Mr. Vieira and the other patients who received new eye wear are happy. To them, glasses are glasses, and the gift of sight they offer are a precious one indeed.

Pulling teeth

For Lt. Col. Gary Geracci, getting any work done was like pulling teeth — literally. As the team’s oral surgeon, the colonel’s days were filled removing decayed or painful teeth from the mouths of patients young and old. There were no fillings to replace and no bridge work to accomplish.

He simply pulled tooth after tooth.

“I ask [the patients] which tooth hurts, they point to it; I ask if they want me to take it out, they nod their heads, and I pull it out,” said Colonel Geracci, from the 55th Medical Group at Offutt AFB, Neb. “The entire process is very quick.”

But it’s also a painful one. The patients received little to no anesthesia during the extraction and all the colonel could offer them in the line of pain killers were a couple doses of Ibuprofen.

Still, the patients continued to line up, each one eager to take his or her turn in the dentist chair. Even before one patient could exit the chair, another was in it.

“It’s a pretty good feeling to come here and know we are providing much-needed services to these people,” the colonel said. “We will make an impact on many of them they will probably never forget. That’s a feeling you can’t beat.” 🐦



Lt. Col. (Dr.) Gary Geracci (left) prepares to remove a decayed tooth from a Colombian boy at the Hospital Toribio Maya in Popayan, Colombia. The colonel is an oral surgeon assigned to the 55th Medical Group at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb. Staff Sgt. Joan Jackson (above), a pharmaceutical technician with the 59th Medical Wing at Lackland, attempts to translate a prescription request while working in a make-shift pharmacy at the hospital.

by Staff Sgt. Niel A. Lynch



Staff Sgt. Enoch Daniels, a medical technician, labels prescription drugs used during a medical readiness training exercise at Cerro Membre, Paraguay.

MEDRETEs provide medical aid, foster international relations

The medical readiness training exercise, or MEDRETE, is an important part of the U.S. military’s Humanitarian and Civic Assistance Program in South and Central America.

Under the supervision of U.S. Southern Command, these exercises bring medical aid to needy rural areas and populations in the region and provide valuable deployment training to Air Force and sister service medical units.

Typical MEDRETEs include medical, dental and sometimes veterinary care and, when properly planned and conducted, they have a tremendous positive impact on the educational and medical infrastructures of an area.

“Because of their humanitarian nature, MEDRETE deployments serve as low cost, short duration, high impact events that engage host nation militaries, civilian ministries, and local populations in a unique and positive manner,” said Master Sgt. Vernon Sandt, superintendent of medical plans and operations at Headquarters Air Forces Southern at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.

The MEDRETE program also enhances the image of the United States across the globe, as it affords medical personnel the opportunity to have a positive, personal impact on the lives of thousands of individuals each year. In many cases, these individuals either do not have regular medical care to take advantage of or are too poor to afford it.

“These exercises do much to promote goodwill between the U.S. and its partner nations,” said Sergeant Sandt. “In many cases, this is the first interaction an individual may have with the U.S. military and when that first contact is a good one, they will always have that positive image in their mind.”

These exercises are also beneficial to the U.S. military by providing new and unique training environments in remote areas.

This year, the U.S. will conduct 65 MEDRETEs in 15 countries throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean, at an estimated cost of nearly \$3 million. Last year, these figures were similar, as the U.S. spent nearly \$3 million and conducted 70 exercises in 18 separate countries. Combined, the MEDRETEs will provide medical care to more than 200,000 individuals – in many cases the only professional medical care they will receive.

— Staff Sgt. Matthew Bates